Understanding Culture Shock

Critical Skills for Transitioning to Life Abroad

You’ve probably heard the term “culture shock” before, but perhaps you think it won’t affect you. In fact, everyone goes through a process of adapting to a new culture when abroad, and reactions can range from mild irritation to extreme trauma. When entering a foreign culture, the cues and clues you normally rely on are gone. Your routine changes completely, and you may have to get used to a lack of privacy or personal space. You’ll need to learn new structures, and abide by new rules. Some people experience culture shock so strongly that they believe they need to return home, but the whole process of cultural adaptation is a rite of passage, and being prepared can make a big difference.

Culture Shock or Culture Fatigue: What Is It?

When you move into a drastically different cultural context, all of a sudden your worldview is inappropriate. Not only do you not get along with your host culture, you also need to adjust your own behavior and tolerance in order to function effectively. The source of your culture shock may come from marked differences in any or all of the following areas of life: customs, beliefs, ceremonies and rituals, social institutions, values, morals, ideals, accepted modes of behavior, ideas and thought patterns, laws, language and the arts. Everything from public transportation and accommodation to security and social life may be significantly different. The term “culture shock” describes the stress brought on by all these changes, but because the term is sometimes considered to have a negative connotation, some experts prefer to use the term “culture fatigue,” while others refer to the reaction as “cultural disorientation” or “change shock.”

(See The Culture Iceberg at the end of this article.)

The Stages of Culture Shock

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Culture shock is like most any disease; it has symptoms and cures. Try to make peace with the fact that adjustment will not happen over night, but will instead take time and effort. Here are a few pointers for coping:

- **Go with the flow**: When you find yourself being judgmental, simply try to accept the different values and behaviors in your host culture. Try to understand the local culture rather than judging it.
- **Participation**: Instead of sitting around your apartment or house reflecting on your sorry state, go out and socialize with locals. Get involved by joining a class or group. Become engaged, and remember that you are a student of the local culture, and every experience is an opportunity to learn.
- **Tolerance**: Undoubtedly, many things will appear strange to you in the beginning. Don’t over-examine the local behaviors and customs. Keep in mind that although they may be different, they are neither better nor worse than your own.
- **Language**: It always helps to understand, if not to speak, the language. Who cares if your grammar and pronunciation are muddied? Your efforts will be appreciated and help you connect.

- **Find a sympathetic host national**: Other expats are helpful, but they’re usually in the same boat as you. A host national can provide a better sounding board for your concerns. And what could be better for your overall experience than having a friend who knows your new country inside and out?
- **Gather information**: Never lose your curiosity. It will give you insight into why people behave as they do. An interest in the history, geography, politics, religion and cultural norms will help you appreciate and adjust to your new environment.
- **Take a break**: Treat yourself to a day off. Bake an apple pie. Take a long, hot bath. Listen to your favorite music. Do something just for yourself, something that is typically North American.
- **Maintain contact with family and friends back home**: Writing or Skype-ing home can help you cope. Be cautious, however, about potentially alarming your relatives about cultural situations they cannot understand or act upon. Keeping a diary or blog is also a good idea.
- **Don’t romanticize your life at home**: Although you may want to maintain contact with family and friends, and may long for some elements of life back home, don’t sulk or spend too much time idealizing your home culture.
- **Accept that culture shock is a process and that you will make it through**: The most valuable thing you can do for yourself is to accept that culture shock is inevitable. Whether it is mild or strong, you will go through an extended process of adaptation in your host culture. Understand the phases, recognize the symptoms and move through the process with confidence that full adaptation is just a few weeks away.
- **Understanding culture shock is an important part of your professional international skill set**: Once you’ve been abroad, you’ve gained first-hand experience of the culture shock process. Demonstrate your understanding of potential employers; show that you recognize the stages of culture shock, its symptoms and its cures. This is valuable in any international workplace.

Conclusion

No matter how many books or videos you watch about your host culture, landing on the ground will be a completely different experience. From your first contact with your new surroundings, the cultural adaptation process begins. Motivation, understanding and a sense of humor will be your best friends throughout this process. We wish you the best of luck on your cross-cultural adventure, and hope you feel the true satisfaction of arriving at the final adjustment stage!
The U-Curve of Adjustment: Four-month Semester Abroad

In the 1950s, Norwegian sociologist Sverre Lysgaard built a visual model showing the stages of cultural adjustment. The U-Curve of Adjustment reveals the progress from initial euphoria upon arrival, to the anxiety and crisis phases, and finally to adjustment and integration. The diagram below is our interpretation of Lysgaard’s original, and it’s geared toward the four-month semester abroad. This diagram will help you keep the natural four-part adjustment process in mind as you pack up and head overseas. If you’re going abroad for a full year, you can expect the first three phases to have the same duration, and the final adjustment phase to be extended.

The Culture Iceberg

When we see an iceberg, we first notice the portion that can be seen above water. In reality, this part of the iceberg represents only a small part of a much bigger whole. Cultures also follow this general principle. The characteristics that are obvious to newcomers (the “above water” characteristics) represent the tip of the iceberg. Art, language, social interactions, traditions, etc. can all be seen at this surface level. But these elements are directly tied to the deeper, less visible elements of culture — those that lie below the surface. This part of the iceberg represents deep-seated values, beliefs and worldviews. Observable behaviors are a direct result of this invisible reality, but it takes effort to understand or even recognize the connection.

When engaging with a new culture, be aware that you don’t just engage with the “tip of the iceberg.” This will ensure that you’re on the path towards real cross-cultural understanding rather than just superficial observation and interaction. Keep in mind also that the amount of time spent abroad is a big factor in this equation. The longer you spend in your host country, the deeper your understanding of its culture. A two-week Spring Break visit opens you up to surface culture, while longer terms abroad give you access to deep culture.